A CIVILIAN OCCUPATION

The Politics of Israeli Architecture

Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman

February 12 - March 30, 2003

Opening reception
February 12, 2003, 7-9 p.m.

Storefront for Art and Architecture
97 Kenmare Street, New York NY 10012

View 1
Taken from Har Homa, a Jewish Neighborhood in Occupied East Jerusalem, looking towards Beit Sahur, a Palestinian town at the outskirts of Bethlehem. On the left is the construction of the wall surrounding Jerusalem.
(photo: Daniel Bauer 2003)

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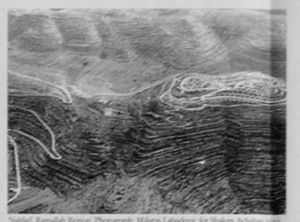
Meshar Gadid, 'The Gaza Strip,' advertisement image 2001



Nahlin, Ramallah Region. Photograph: Milutin Labudovic for Shalom Achshav, 2002

Sightlines, Salfit Region, the West Bank

Mitzpe Yeriz, Jordan Valley Region. Photograph: Daniel Bauer for Shalom Achshav 1999

The Jewish settlement of Ariel (top) and the Palestinian town of Salfit (bottom) 2000

Ma'ale Levona

Karnei Zut

National conflicts are characterized not only by the rapid processes of eruptive transformations, but also by the slow duration of building and the lengthy bureaucratic mechanisms of planning. Together these form the scale at which territorial conflicts are played out. Throughout the last century, a different kind of warfare has been radically transforming the landscapes of Israel and Palestine. In it, the mundane elements of planning and architecture have been conscripted as tactical tools in the Israeli state strategy, seeking national and geo-political objectives in the organization of space. The relationship between the landscape and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is symbiotic. The terrain dictates the nature, intensity and focal points of confrontation, while the conflict itself is manifested most clearly in the processes of transformation, adaptation, construction and obliteration of the landscape and the built environment. The landscape becomes the battlefield in which power and state control confront subversive and direct resistance. In an environment where architecture and planning are systematically instrumentalized as the executive arms of the Israeli State, planning decisions do not often follow criteria of economic sustainability, ecology or efficiency of services; rather, they are employed to serve strategic and political agendas. Space becomes the physical embodiment of a matrix of forces, manifested across the landscape in the construction of roads, hilltop settlements, development towns and garden-suburbs.

A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture, was originally commissioned by the Israel Association of United Architects (IAUA) for the International Union of Architect's Congress in Berlin in July 2002. After the catalog was completed, the IAUA withdrew their support of the project, canceled the exhibition and banned the catalog.

Bringing together investigations by Israeli architects, scholars, photographers and journalists addressing the political role of architecture and planning in Israel, this project supplements prevalent historical and political analysis of the conflict with a detailed description of its physical transformations. Architecture is presented as a political issue–the material product of politics itself–illustrating the spatial dimension of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The exhibition at Storefront is the first public presentation of this work.

The Mountain

The topography of the West Bank is easily identified as three long strips of land running from north to south. The most eastern strip, and the lowest in elevation, is the sparsely populated Jordan Valley. To the west rise the high and steep mountains of Judea and Samaria along whose main ridge most large Palestinian cities are located. Further west are the green and fertile slopes of Judea and Samaria. Here, moderate topography, arable soil, an abundance of water and a view overlooking the coastal plain make this region the West Bank's 'Area of High Demand.' It is in this strip that most Palestinian villages and Jewish settlements are located.

In a strange and almost perfect correlation between latitude, political ideology and urban form, each topographical strip became an arena for different phases of the settlement project, promoted by politicians with various agendas, inhabited by settlers of different ideologies in different settlement typologies.

The civilian occupation of the West Bank began in the Jordan Valley during the first years of Israeli rule under Labor governments (1967-1977). Fifteen agricultural villages (Kibbutzim and Moshavim) were built according to the Labor Party plan that sought to establish a secure border with Jordan while relying on the principle of 'maximum security and maximum territory for Israel, with a minimum number of Arabs.' Following the political turnabout of 1977 in which the Likud party replaced Labor in government, the political climate in Israel changed. Thereafter scores of new settlements were established in the mountain region, in and around the Palestinian cities, with the intention of annexing the area to prevent territorial concessions. For the price of a small apartment in Tel Aviv, settlers could purchase their own red-roofed house and benefit from considerable government subsidies. Beyond the economic incentive of these settlements, the climb from the plains to the hills was argued with the rhetoric of the 'regeneration of the soul,' as acts of 'personal and national renewal,' and imbued with the mystic quality of the heights.

The mountain peaks of the West Bank easily lend themselves to state seizure. Land ownership has been hard to determine ever since the Ottoman period. During Ottoman times, residents paid tax only on the lands they cultivated. These lands later reverted to private ownership. Whatever land could be proven to be under continuous cultivation remained in private Palestinian ownership, and the rest was declared State Land. Palestinian cultivated lands are found mainly on the slopes and in the valleys, where the agriculturally suitable alluvial soils erode down from the limestone slopes of the West Bank peaks. The barren hilltops, a patchwork quilt of isolated plots and discontinuous islands around peaks, were seized by the State. The West Bank was thus divided across its vertical axis. In almost every area the hilltops were annexed to Israel de facto, while the valleys between them were left under Palestinian ownership.

The Vertical Perspective

After the Six Days War in 1967, a new and previously unimagined extent of territory was occupied by the Israeli army. Information about the West Bank was quickly gathered from the air. A special double-lens aerial camera, capable of registering stereoscopic images, was acquired and a series of photographic sorties was launched. The stereoscopic camera is designed to capture two simultaneous images at a slight angle to one another. When viewed through a special optical instrument, the shades of gray on the two flat images are transformed by the gaze of the intelligence analyst into a three-dimensional illusion of depth, reproducing a tabletop model of the pilot's vertical perspective. Photometrical land surveying from aerial photography, reproduced at variable scales and with remarkable clarity, replaced the conventional land-surveyed maps as the most rapid and practical way of representing the territory.

This mapping was the end result of an intensive process of photography, analysis and classification, one in which the terrain was charted, topographical lines drafted, slope gradients calculated, and land use marked. The process was so complete and rapid that at the time the West Bank was likely one of the most intensively observed and photographed terrains in the world. This project was not undertaken as an objective study but rather as an act of establishing national proprietorship that anticipated a spatial reality yet to come.

Vertical Planning

As intelligence analysts gave way to cartographers and planners, the stereoscopic images became the primary tool with which topographical lines were drawn on maps and, on occasion, even provided the slate for the design work itself. The process of settlement construction starts with planning on top of an orthogonal-photographic-map (ortho-photo) or a topographical map at a scale of 1:2250. Since the construction of the mountain settlements necessitated building in areas with steep slopes and special morphological formations, the terrain was divided into separate topographical conditions and each was allocated a distinct settlement typology.

The formal processes which base mountain settlements on topographical conditions absorb the laws of erosion into the practice of urban design. The form laid out by nature in the specific summit morphology becomes the blueprint of development. The mountain settlement is typified by a principle of concentric organization in which the topographical contours are retraced as lines of infrastructure. The roads are laid out in rings around the summit with the water, sewage, electricity and telephone lines buried under them. The division of lots is equal and repetitive, providing small private houses positioned along the roads, against the backdrop of the landscape. The public functions are generally located within the innermost ring, on the highest ground. The ideal arrangement for a small settlement is a circle. However, in reality the geometry of the plan is distorted by the insistent demands of a highly irregular topography, as well as by the extent and form of available State Land. Rather than examples of ordered forms, settlements are manifestations of anti-forms, the end results of tactical, land-use and topographical constraints.

Optical Layout

Vision dictates design methods on all scales. The arrangement of homes around summits imposes on the dwellers axial visibility (and lateral invisibility) oriented in two directions: inward and outward. The inward gaze protects the soft cores of the settlements, and the outward one surveys the landscape around it. The settlements create a large-scale network of civilian fortifications, generating tactical territorial surveillance in the state's regional strategic defense plan. As a fundamental organizing principle, visual control guided the distribution and planning of the settlements across the entire territory, creating a network of observation points. From a topographical standpoint this principle sited the settlements on summits. From an urban perspective it guided the layout of settlements as rings around these summits, positioning homes perpendicular to the slope. Architecturally, it was integrated into the arrangements and orientation of rooms, and finally into the precise positioning of windows.

Indeed, the form of the mountain settlements is constructed according to geometric guidelines that unite the effectiveness of sight with that of spatial order, thereby producing sight-lines that function to achieve different forms of power: strategic in overlooking main traffic arteries, control in overlooking Palestinian towns and villages, and self defense in overlooking the immediate surroundings and approach roads. Settlements become, in effect, optical devices designed to exercise control through supervision and surveillance.

By placing settlers across the landscape, the Israeli government is not merely utilizing the agencies of state power and control, namely the police and army, for the administration of power; rather, it 'drafts' the civilian population to inspect, control and subdue the Palestinian population. Here, an inconsistency develops between what the settlers want to see, the way they describe and understand the panorama, and the way that their eyes are 'hijacked' for the strategic and geopolitical aims of the state. The desire for a single family home is being mobilized to serve the quest for military domination, while an act of domesticity, shrouded in the cosmetic facade of red tiles and green lawns, provides territorial control.

The Horizontal Panorama

Settlers turn topography into scenography, forming an exegetical landscape with a mesh of scriptural signification that must be extracted from the panorama and 'read' rather than merely 'seen.' No longer seen as a resource to be agriculturally or industrially cultivated, the landscape, imbued with imaginary religious signifiers, established the link that helped revive religious-national myths that displace (on the very same land) ancient with modern time. In the ideal image of the pastoral landscape, integral to the perspective of colonial traditions, the admiration of the rustic panorama is always viewed through the window frames of modernity. The impulse to retreat from the city to the country reasserts the virtues of a simpler life close to nature. It draws on the opposition between luxury and simplicity, the spontaneous and the planned, nativity and foreignness, which are nothing but the opposite poles of the axis of vision that stretches between the settlements and their surrounding landscape. Furthermore, the re-creation of the picturesque scenes of a Biblical landscape becomes a testimony to an ancient claim on the land.

Within the panorama, however, lies a cruel paradox: the very thing that renders the landscape 'Biblical' or 'pastoral' – its traditional inhabitation and cultivation in terraces, olive orchards, stone buildings and the presence of livestock – is produced by the Palestinians, whom the Jewish settlers came to replace. The very people who cultivate the 'green olive orchards' and render the landscape Biblical, are themselves excluded from the panorama. The Palestinians are there to produce the scenery and then disappear. The panoptic arrangement of sight-lines therefore serves two contradictory agendas: supervision and a self imposed scotoma. The Jewish settlements superimpose another datum of latitudinal geography upon an existing landscape. Settlers could thus see only other settlements, ignore the Palestinian towns and villages, and feel that they have truly arrived 'as the people without land to the land without people.'

Latitude has become more than the mere relative position on the folded surface of the terrain. It literally functions to establish parallel geographies of 'First' and 'Third' Worlds that inhabit two distinct planar strata in the startling and unprecedented proximity that only the vertical dimension of the mountains could provide. The landscape does not simply signify power relations, but functions as an instrument of domination and control. The extreme relationship that developed between politics, strategy and building practices within the topography of the West Bank exposes the terrifying role of the most ubiquitous of architectural typologies. Rather than the conclusive, binary division between two nations across a boundary line, the organization of the West Bank has created multiple separations and provisional boundaries that relate to one another through surveillance and control, an intensification and ramification of power that could be achieved in this form only because of the particularity of the terrain. By strategically overlooking the valleys where most Palestinian villages are located, the settlements precipitated the creation of two parallel and self-referential ethno-national-geographies that manifest themselves along the vertical axis in the physical 'above' and 'below.'

Settlements are thus nothing but the last gesture in the urbanization of enclaves. Perfecting the politics of separation, seclusion and visual control, they could be seen as the end condition of contemporary urban and architectural formations such as suburban developments and gated communities. The climb up the West Bank mountains coincided with the widespread flight of the middle class from cities to the protective walls of suburbia. Is the principle of exclusive by-pass roads really that different from the deliberate carving up of poor communities with highways without exit? Are we actually describing a unique place whose specificity renders its study a local curiosity? Or, could this be a worst case scenario of capitalist globalization and its spatial fall out.

Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman

A Civilian Occupation, The Politics of Israeli Architecture, edited by Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman will be published in Spring 2003 with Babel and Verso Press. It includes contributions by: Daniel Bauer, Meron Benvenisti, Zvi Efrat, Nadav Harel, Zeltan Kluger, Miki Kratsman, Milutin Labudovich, Yehezkel Lein /B'tselem, Gideon Levy, Ilan Potash, Sharon Rotbard, Rafi Segal, Efrat Shvili, Eran Tamir, David Tartakover, Eyal Weizman, Pavel Wolberg, Oren Yiftahel.

The Storefront exhibition includes works by:
Milutin Labudovich /Peace Now– aerial photographs
Daniel Bauer – View 1 (Beit Sahur)

Exhibition credits:
Nadav Harel, Ilan Potash, Malkit Shoshan, Vitala Tauz, Merav Twig, Tamar Zor

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Shalom Achshav, Peace Now. All aerial photographs in the show courtesy of Shalom Achshav.

This exhibition was produced in collaboration with KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin which will present the exhibition 'Territories' curated by Anselm Franke, Eyal Weizman, Rafi Segal and Stefano Boeri in June 2003
www.kw-berlin.de

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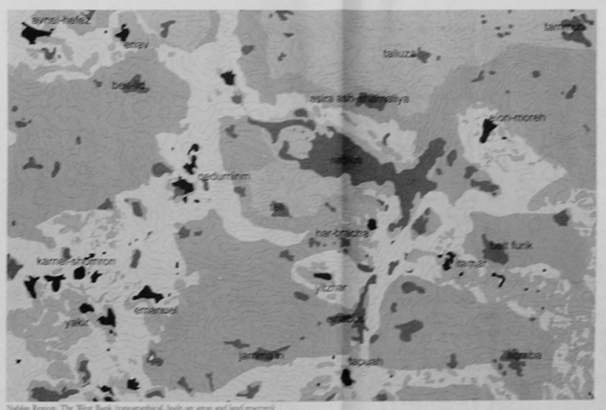
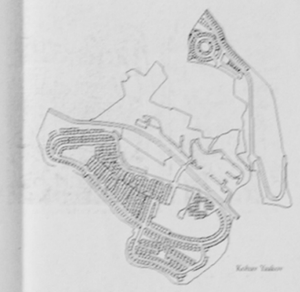


Nablus Region, The West Bank (topographical, built-up areas and land reserves)



Kedmat Tsahar

Qiryat

Ma'ale

Ela

A Civilian Occupation
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February 22–March 30, 2003

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Storefront for Art and Architecture
97 Kenmare Street, New York City

Gallery hours
Wednesday - Sunday 11–6 p.m.

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